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ABSTRACT

Many gifted children enter kindergarten already reading and in need of reading instruction that is different from the regular program. A reading program for gifted youngsters that is literature-based will help develop comprehension skills at the highest cognitive levels and will also foster the desire to read. Beginning with the interpretation of illustrations in wordless picture books and continuing with print material, children can identify story themes (main ideas), predict plot outcomes, and define characters and setting. Possibilities for developing sequencing skills include: (1) putting the main points on cards, arranging them in order; (2) outlining/telling what happens through creative drama; and (3) using a flannel board and cutouts. Frequent questioning helps children to develop a viewpoint, to analyze characterization and to evaluate various elements in the story. Children with more advanced conceptual development and background can deal with books with more complicated plot structure, such as Beverly Cleary's "Dear Mr. Henshaw" or Natalie Babbitt's "Tuck Everlasting." Students should be encouraged to keep their own journals, an activity that increases language skills and self-understanding. The activities of comparison/contrast may be used advantageously with books by the same author or in series, or with books with similar elements. Book discussion groups are particularly effective when used with gifted children, but care should be taken never to scrutinize, dissect, or analyze until reading literature loses its appeal as an enjoyable lifelong activity. (References and a book list are included.) (NKA)

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LITERATURE, COMPREHENSION, AND GIFTED READERS

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Running head: Comprehension

ABSTRACT

Instruction for students gifted in reading should focus on developing higher cognitive level comprehension skills as well as fostering the desire to read. Literature books can be used to perform both functions. This manuscript provides some examples of books and techniques to employ with gifted readers.

LITERATURE, COMPREHENSION, AND GIFTED READERS

Gifted readers ". . . often acquire reading skills without instruction because of their ability to generalize." (Bonds & Bonds, 1983, p.5). Many of these youngsters enter kindergarten already reading. For example: Sarah was reading Wilder's Little House books; Kim showed great enjoyment of Parrish's Amelia Bedelia; Lila could read and understand practically any book in the school library; Mike easily could sight-read, orally to the class, fifth or sixth grade level books. Clearly, children such as these need instruction in reading that is different from the regular programs.

> Keeping the gifted children plugged into the regular reading program frustrates and often destroys their belief that their schools and all the wonderful books found there were going to be exciting and joyful. (Brown & Rogan, 1983, p. 6).

A reading program for gifted youngsters should have two main goals; 1) to develop comprehension skills aimed at the highest cognitive levels as in Bloom's Taxonomy and 2) to foster the desire to read. Literature books can be used advantageously to do both.

Comprehension development that goes beyond the basic factual level must begin at the onset of reading instruction and should include the interpretation of illustrations as

well as the written text.

PICTURE BOOKS

Through learning to select the appropriate picture clues, children can identify story themes (main ideas), predict plot outcomes, and define characters and setting.

Wordless picture books, as Keats' SKATES (1973), have varied possibilities. Using the picture on the first page, children could be asked to use the clues to decide what the story will be about. As the story is told by the children, have them predict the role of the little cats. In order to develop the concepts of theme and plot, at the end of the story ask children why they thought the author included the little cats, "Were they needed in the story?" If so, "Why?"

Setting may be established by questions as: "Where did the story take place? How do you know? When did the story take place? What details in the pictures helped you decide?"

Closely allied to wordless picture books are those of one sentence as Hutchins' ROSIE'S WALK (1968). In this humorous book, the plot is developed completely by the pictures requiring careful observation by the reader of details for accurate predictions. As the story begins, children could predict the role of each character -- Rosie and the fox -- as well as the basis for the role assignments. As the story progresses, children can infer what will happen to the fox.

Follow up by asking, "What clues were you given to help you make your inference?"

Stimulate further thinking by suggesting a retelling of the story from the viewpoint of the fox -- perhaps as an innocent victim.

Have children discuss what they consider to be the main idea of the story with the reasons for their selection. Another possibility for developing the main idea concept (perhaps for more advanced students) could be: "If this story had been presented as a fable, what do you think the moral would be? Why?"

Sequencing skills may be enhanced through the use of a flanned board and cutouts. Children could show the order of events in the story as they tell it to another group. Suggest that children add more scenes for ROSIE'S WALK, either by describing or drawing them. Using this plot pattern, children could develop their own stories.

Freeman's DANDELION (1964), a book with equal pictures and text, has many possible uses. For developing the theme/main idea, use questions as the following: "What did Dandelion learn in this story? What parts of the story make you think that?"

Possibilities for developing sequence include: (1) put the main points on cards, arrange them in the order of happening; (2) outline/tell what happens in order so that the story may be presented through creative drama; (3) use questions as, "Why did the visit to the barbershop occur before going

to Jenny's?"

In developing a viewpoint, teachers could ask children: "Show how you would feel if Jenny Giraffe closed the door and wouldn't let you in." Character analysis and evaluation skills could be strengthened by having children decide if they would want Dandelion as their friend and by giving two specific reasons (based on the story) to justify their decision. Further analysis could deal with the title of the book.

Other activities requiring higher level skills could include ideas as the following: write an article for the newspaper, either for the social news section or for the human interest section. "How would they differ? Write an article for both and compare them."

Steig's DOCTOR DE SOTO (1982) could provide students with particular enjoyment due to the situation in which the dentist could be at the mercy of the patient. Children could predict how the Doctor and his wife will react to the situation. "Is your prediction consistent with the story? Why?"

Books as THE ISLAND OF THE SKOG (Kellogg, 1973) appeal to the more mature reader because of the humor and concepts employed. In using this book, teacher's guidance would take the following form. Read the story to the point of the mice's discovery of the island. Then use the following sequence: "Visualize, in your mind, a skog -- size, shape, teeth, eyes, etc. Describe him, show how he would walk, demonstrate the kind of voice he would have, etc. Explain why you think he

would look and act the ways you described or showed."

Read the next four pages to show the footprint. "How does a footprint such as this match your idea of the skog? Do you want to revise your description? How? If you were one of those mice, what would you do, now? Are there other possibilities? What are they? How could we decide which would be the best idea? (Teachers could develop the word and concept of "criteria.") What are some criteria we could use to help us select the best idea? Draw a picture or diagram or make a model to illustrate your plan. After you have completed your model or picture, read the rest of the story to see how the author handled the situation. Evaluate the feasibility of your plan."

"Briefly, what do you think the story is really telling us?"

This story also lends itself well for studying character development in terms of types of characters, as Jenny and Bouncer, and how they were revealed to the reader. Another possibility exists for reorganizing the story with the skog as a monster.

BOOKS FOR MORE ABLE READERS

Children with more advanced conceptual development and background can deal with the many excellent, enjoyable literature books that provide opportunities for probing and creative thought.

The different form of plot structure used in Cleary's DEAR MR. HENSHAW (1983) creates avenues for study as: "Is this a story or a chronology of events? On what do you base your answer? Analyze the plot structure. What are the pros and cons of using such a structure?"

"What point do you think the author is trying to make?"

"Describe the type of person that Leigh appears to be. Why do you think so? How does the author reveal the character to you? How realistic as a person is Leigh? What type of person is Mr. Henshaw? How else could he have been portrayed? In what ways would this have changed the story?"

"Pretend that you are Leigh and summarize your first year in junior high." Students could be encouraged to write their own diaries or journals for at least the period of a year -- perhaps even as a dialogue journal. This activity is valuable in increasing language skills and self-understanding.

TUCK EVERLASTING (Babbitt, 1975) provides excellent possibilities for exploring the issues of everlasting life, choices, and maturing. Prior to reading the story, students could use the brainstorming technique to list the pros and cons of remaining physically the same age forever. After reading the story, students can compare the pros and cons examined in the book with those listed by the group. "Were there any points (either pro or con) not used in the story that if used could have made a drastic change in the plot and if so, what were they and how would the story have changed?"

"What were the various choices made by Winnie in the story? How did her choices affect the plot development? What evidence could you present of growth or maturation in any of the characters?"

"How and why does Babbitt intertwine reality and fantasy in the story?" Parts of this story could be rewritten as a radio script by a student(s), practiced, and taped for use by other students as a lure to reading the book.

Compare TUCK EVERLASTING to Babbitt's SEARCH FOR DELICIOUS (1969) in terms of theme/main idea, plot, and style.

Story comparisons are excellent for developing higher level cognitive skills. The comparisons may be between books by the same author as the Babbitt books or between books with a similar element(s) by different authors. For example, interesting comparisons may be made among the stories; A TASTE OF BLACKBERRIES (Smith, 1973), BLACKBERRIES IN THE DARK (Jukes, 1985), and THE BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA (Paterson, 1977) -- all dealing with the death of a friend or loved one. Ideas as the following could be used. "What is the theme/main idea developed by each author?"

"What traits of the main characters could be used to predict how they would react to the situation? Are there any common traits exhibited by main characters of the three books? In your opinion, how realistic was the reaction of each character?"

"What are the basic differences and likenesses in the plot development structures of the three stories?"

"If these stories were summarized by a one sentence moral, what would that moral be?"

The total area of traditional literature (folk and fairy tales, myths, fables, epics) is an excellent source for use in guiding children to compare and contrast elements of style, plot, theme, and characterizations in stories from various cultures.

SHADOW OF A BULL (Wojciechowska, 1964) could have special significance for gifted youngsters. Children, individually or as a small group, could develop a summary similar to the following: At the age of nine, Manolo Olivar becomes aware of three things: 1) as he becomes older, he looks more like his father; 2) he is a coward; 3) his townsmen expect him to grow up to be a famous bullfighter like his father. Discussion could include questions similar to the following: "What relationship does each point in the summary have to the other? How does Manolo reconcile his wishes to the expectations? In your opinion, is he a coward? On what do you base your decision? Based on the story circumstances, how would you have reacted in Manolo's place? Does Manolo change in the story? Explain your answer."

"Summarize what you think this story is all about. What is your interpretation of the title of this book?"

Sibling relationships are explored in Paterson's JACOB, HAVE I LOVED (1980). Besides characterization study of this

more advanced story, students could identify the elements that make this analogous to the story of Jacob and Esau.

BOOK DISCUSSION TECHNIQUE

An excellent technique to use especially with gifted students at any learning level is the book discussion group. In this technique, the students complete the reading of the selected book(s) by a certain date and then meet together to discuss the various elements of the book(s). After the initial experience, teachers become listeners out of the group, enabling the students to become the leaders. Early experiences may be facilitated through the use of a discussion guide that could include ideas as the following (wording, etc. should fit the children's level):

What main point do you think the author was making in this story?

How does the setting influence the story?

Discover all you can about the physical and emotional/personality traits of the main character. How does the author reveal the character to you? How do you think s/he would react if _____?

Consider the plot structure used and its effectiveness in developing the theme.

Identify any specific style devices the author used (i.e., satire, analogies, etc.). Evaluate the effectiveness of the style (devices, vocabulary, etc.) used with the setting, character portrayal, etc.

This technique should not be overused, but it does have stimulating and thought provoking possibilities.

SUMMARY

Books may be looked at in such a way as to increase awareness and understanding which can deepen enjoyment. They should never be scrutinized, dissected, and analyzed until they have lost all learning and/or enjoyment appeal. The task of teaching reading is incomplete unless we instill a desire to read. For gifted individuals, literature books used as learning sources may make reading an enjoyable lifelong activity.

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